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Language arts teaching is supposed to be based on the principle of starting where the child is and communicating to him through channels which he has at that point, in language which is familiar to him, and with illustrative concepts with which he is familiar. Beginning materials in this area, however, have made only minor strides to this goal and these strides are not yet based on a theory of the relationship between oral and written language. As a partial solution to this problem: (1) Textbook writers should provide beginning reading materials which use the syntax of the child's oral language and avoid ambiguity and rapid shifts in tense or viewpoint. (2) Teachers should recognize a hierarchy of importance in children's reading and speaking errors. The child's errors in learning standard English should not be confused with his errors in learning to read. (3) Administrators should assess the classroom teaching situation to decide if the schools are putting restrictions on the normal use of oral language. They should also devote greater attention to matters of content in the curriculum. (4) Researchers should study the process of acquiring standard English. A "new language arts" is needed--one coordinated with a complete overhaul in the objectives of education. It will put considerable emphasis on self-instruction; it will stress the innate abilities of its students; it will be problem oriented; and it will encourage self-knowledge. (JD)

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE WAY KIDS TALK?

Roger W. Shuy
National Conference on the Language Arts
April, 1969

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One of the most remarkable events of my entire academic career has to be the time I was asked to teach a course in children's literature. The course had been taught rather traditionally for many years in the education department of this particular small liberal arts college. For some reason which remains obscure to me over a decade later, the education department tired of its approach to the subject and, since children's literature is, after all, a literature course, the English department inherited it. Exactly how the linguist in residence inherited it has been clouded by time, but it was for me at least, a happy windfall.

One of the most important principles I learned in my three years of teaching children's literature was that good literature for children will see life from the child's point of view. There are numerous ways to violate this principle and writers for children have managed to do so on many occasions. To illustrate my point let me cite parts of two poems about rain, both of which were written for children to hear and appreciate. Neither is terrible and neither is timeless. What will become immediately clear, however, is that one will view rain as a child might view it. The other views rain as an adult <u>thinks</u> a child might view it.

"The Umbrella Brigade" Laura E. Richards

"Pitter patter!" falls the rain on the
school-room window-pane. Such a plashing,
such a dashing! Will it e'er be dry
again?

"The Rain" Dorothy Aldis

The rain is raising prickles
In my little pool
And washing all the dirty worms
Pink and beautiful

This comparison, of course, is unfair in many ways. Vogue in children's literature has changed greatly since the first poem was written and the flood of attention given children's literature in recent decades places older children's literature, which was considerably more scarce, into unfair competition. But the second poem is quite illustrative of literature written from a more realistic child's point of view.

The principle which we can learn from this illustration is similar to that held by communications specialists: in teaching, start where the learner is and communicate to him through channels which he has at that point, in language which is familiar to him and with illustrative concepts with which he is familiar. This does <u>not</u> mean that the learner should never develop new channels, new language or new concepts. It only means that in pedagogy we should start with what he has and move toward what we want him to have.

I make this point laboriously and circuitously because, as obvious as it may seem for language arts teaching to adhere to this principle, beginning materials have made only minor strides toward it and these strides have not been based on anything which remotely resembles a theory of the relationship between oral and written language. This paper is not a direct answer to this failure. That is, it does not volunteer such a theory. But it does offer a set of suggestions about what is involved in developing such a theory. These suggestions are in no way exhaustive. They are not always based on evidence derived

from research and they focus on the language arts only as a linguist might see the situation, thus forming only a partial view of the subject. The following suggestions are individualized for textbook writers, teachers, researchers and administrators.

1. SUGGESTIONS FOR TEXTBOOK WRITERS

a. Early written materials should match the syntax of the child's oral language. There is nothing essentially new about this principle. It has been said many times in recent years, frequently in the context of assassinating Dick and Jane prose. Although this may seem like a dead horse that does not, once again, need killing, a mere scanning of some current reading texts will reveal that although we have begun to divest ourselves of "See Spot run" syntax, we have replaced it with syntax which is occassionally only slightly better.

For example, I note passages from four recent reading series. Of the four, one purports to be linguistic, one is multi-ethnic and one is programmed. Their identity is un-important; the examples might be found in almost any series. The sentences in question are the following:

1. He is sad that he acted as he did.
2. I had a hat, I did.
3. Sam hands a man the map.
4. A pin is in the thin tan mat and the cat is thin and the pig is fat.
5. Jerry swung his bat. Over the fence went the ball.
6. Round is a kitten. Round is a ball.

Sentence one contains the conjunction as rather than like, perhaps in deference to the association with recent advertisements which have been unanimously derided by the English teachers of America. Whatever

the status of the conjunction like may be, the alternative, as, sounds odd in the above sentence and it is foreign to the oral language of any children I have ever heard.

Sentence two has a kind of archaic, poetic ring to it, somewhat like a chant of a British sailor. It is, of course, quite questionable in terms of matching the child's oral language and is likely to cause a misreading or, at least, some puzzlement.

In sentence three, the problem is less obvious. In fact, most of the subjects whom I asked to read the sentence misread it without even knowing they had erred. For some reason, readers want to exchange the position of the and a, producing Sam hands the man a map rather than Sam hands a man the map.

The fourth sentence is an excellent example of what can happen when a theory of teaching reading gets in the way of teaching reading. It is obvious that the authors intended to produce a passage which contained only words which illustrate two grapheme-phoneme patterns, ⟨i⟩ → /i/ and ⟨a⟩ → /æ/. This they did quite well, but at the expense of anything remotely resembling the reality of children's oral language.

In number five it was necessary to cite two contiguous sentences since the second one, which begins with a prepositional phrase followed by a predicate, is quite unlike a child's oral language. Small wonder we get many instances of children running the two sentences together as in, "Jerry swung his bat over the fence...." The child who misreads sentences like this does not necessarily have a problem recognizing capital letters or periods. He has, instead, yielded to his knowledge of his own oral language. This knowledge tells him that prepositional phrases of this sort simply don't begin oral sentences.

Number six poses a similar problem. These sentences appear as the only utterances on two contiguous pages. As simple as they appear

to be, they are frequently misread, primarily because they are unpredictable. That is, they are metaphors and the association of roundness with a kitten or a ball is implied rather than stated. The beginning reader has been making his way partly by decoding and partly by associating what he knows about his language and about his world with the printed page. He may have heard or used expressions like "round as a pancake" or"sharp as a tack." But he may not yet be ready for "round is a kitten," at least not without some warning. The question of when a person is ready for metaphor remains open for discussion but if one of the important aspects of acquiring reading is the predictability of the relationship of the printed page to the child's oral language, we should consider the effect of metaphor in this process.

These six illustrations may not be as grossly unrealistic as the Dick and Jane language of yesterday's readers but they are evidence enough that the child's language is still not the beacon which lights the children to reading skills. Some materials developers are still seeing children's language through the same adult eyes which produced pitter-patter rain poems. Sometimes this dim vision is caused by their failure to modernize or, in this case by their failure to listen to the way kids talk (1, 2, 3, 5). Sometimes the blurred vision stems from a theoretical stance (4). Sometimes it comes from an underestimate of the need for predictability in reading materials (6).

Still another source of the mismatch of oral language and written text may be simply that these two kinds of language have different conventional forms. In recent months I have kept track of several of my own written expressions which I would certainly hesitate to use in every day oral language. Such examples are:

Written	Oral
What has this to do with it?	What does this have to do with it?
He ran a half mile.	He ran half a mile.
Many people poured in.	Lots of people poured in.
In the midst of the crowd.	In the middle of the crowd.
Not nearly as healthy.	Nowhere near as healthy.
The reason is that ...	The reason is because ...
But for a small amount ...	Except for a small amount ...

Why, then should early written materials match the syntax of the child's oral language? If a child is simply decoding letters into sounds and somehow deriving cumulative meaning in the process, there is no real need to worry about syntax. The process of reading, however, appears to involve more than mere letter to sound decoding. Even at the beginning stages the child who has any comprehension of what he is reading will call upon his knowledge of the English language to predict what is coming next. Once he has decoded st—, for example, his knowledge of English phonological rules keeps him from producing /f, v, l, m, n, k, g, d, t, č or ǰ/. Likewise, once he has managed "The boy hit __," he can predict that the final word will be a noun of some sort. His understanding of the context may enable him to predict, furthermore, that the last word is ball. Most likely it is not spinach or choir-robe.

It should be clear, then, that the written materials require a regular, modern, predictable syntax which reflects the child's oral language. Otherwise he may be trapped into misreading based on his own predictions from his own oral language.

b. Early written materials should avoid ambiguity.

Much could be said concerning the need for beginning materials to be culturally unambiguous. Inner-city children may not fully appreciate stories which claim that the policeman is their friend or that a trip to the supermarket in mother's station wagon can be an exciting experience. Our attention here, however, focusses on the structural ambiguities of language which are illustrated by sentences such as, "Sinking ships can be dangerous." This sentence can be understood to mean either "The sinking ships can be dangerous" or "Sinking the ships can be dangerous." From a brief perusal of a few beginning reading texts I find several examples of this sort:

7. A bird is chirping and splashing in the spring.
8. Walter went up the hill with Ann. "Let me stay back on the path," he begged.
9. Larry said, "you like cake, Jimmy."
10. Ann rips the bag. The bag had rings in it. Ann is rich.
11. I am a big fat rat ... The rat is back.
    It is in the kitchen.
12. Tab hit on her chin in the dirt.

In sentence seven the ambiguity stems from the word spring. Does it refer to a season of the year or to a small mountain stream?

In example eight it becomes difficult to tell just exactly where Walter is. The first sentence seems to indicate the he has gone somewhere but the verb stay in the second sentence seems to indicate that he hasn't gotten there yet. Where, indeed, is Walter?

For some children, sentence nine can be interpreted as a question, particularly if the reader is inclined toward oral language expectations.

"You like cake," in the oral language of many people, means "Do you like cake?"

Illustration ten requires three contiguous sentences for us to observe a shift in tenses from present to past and back again to present; surely a confusing sequence for the young reader.

Example eleven is much like number 4, except that instead of shifting tenses, we observe a shift in perspective. The story is initially told in the first person, then later it shifts to third person narration.

The twelfth sentence seems to suffer from an attempt to preserve a limited number of patterns in the text. Apparently landed on is re-replaced with hit on to preserve the ⟨i⟩→/i/ pattern found also in chin and in. The result, however regular in terms of grapheme-phoneme relationships, is a peculiar locution which may give some readers considerable pause.

Here, as in the case of the suggestion concerning the need to relate the child's language to the written text, the problems are not as severe as they used to be. There is some evidence, in fact, that current writers are conscious of the need to avoid both cultural and structural ambiguities in early written materials. But the warning must still be sounded for, as the preceding examples clearly show, ambiguity is still an interfering factor in such materials.

2. SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

a. Teachers should recognize a heirarchy of cruciality in the presumed errors of children in both oral and written language. At this stage in our knowledge of the subjective reactions of society to oral language and to the reactions of teachers to the reading and writing of children, it should be possible to plot the major outlines of cruciality of the phenomena. Ob-

viously not all presumed errors of speech, reading or writing, are of equal significance. Some count more than others. Recent research of sociolinguists rather clearly shows that society as a whole ranks grammatical variations from standard as considerably more important than variety in pronunciation or vocabulary.

This suggests, of course, that the primary focus of oral language training should be on matters of grammar. This is not to say that all pronunciations are less important than all grammatical features for, indeed, a case could be made for the cruciality of such features as /d/ for /ð/ in <u>these</u> and /v/ for /ð/ in <u>brother</u>. On the whole, however, the usual pronunciation features which distinguish social or geographical dialects do not carry heavy social pressures.

If this sort of information can be discovered for oral language it seems reasonable to assume that it can also be found for reading and writing. Exactly how ill-thought-of is a person who stumbles as he reads orally or a person who writes a dull, ungrammatical and badly spelled composition? What little we know about how readers and writers are judged by society comes primarily from teachers of both subjects, not from the general public as a whole. Is it possible that teachers of reading and writing, like teachers of oral language skills, have been attending the matters less crucial than others? Much of the currently available oral language materials for poor black children focus on matters of pronunciation (Golden 1965, Lin 1964, Hurst 1965), evidence of how misguided our sense of cruciality has been. In reading,

does it really matter whether or not a person hesitates, back tracks, or self-corrects? Is his regional or social dialect relevant to a judgment of how well he reads? If a black child reads "She go to the store" for "She goes to the store" is this a reading error?

The field of composition stands, perhaps, in slightly better shape with respect to a hierarchy of cruciality. Although spelling errors have long been overrated in terms of the logic of composition, they seem to be ranked very highly by society as a whole and thereby justify the attention given them. Grammatical errors also rank very high and this seems to correlate well with the high cruciality paid to grammar in oral language. But how highly does the public rate sentence variety? How highly ranked is ambiguity? Irrelevance? Apt illustration? Clear outline or framework?

For both reading and composition it seems reasonable for teachers to be concerned about the cruciality of a given problem at a given stage in a child's education, just as these considerations are finally being made in the area of oral language. Until such a hierarchy is established, we cannot really know whether we are addressing ourselves to the most important matters or merely to peripheral concerns.

b. <u>Teachers should not confuse learning standard English with learning to read.</u> At first reaction, this suggestion may seem to be saying that there is no relationship between reading and oral language. It does not say this. It may also seem to indicate that this writer does not feel that standard English

is a good thing. This is not true either. What it really says is that reading is a decoding of written language which reflects oral language. We have already observed in this paper that the written language sometimes has a mind of its own and, somehow, does not always reflect that oral language in a one-to-one fashion. For those who do not speak standard English, this mismatch of oral language with written text (written by a standard English speaker) is even greater. Some nonstandard English speaking children find the mismatch so great that the task seems insurmountable unless they either learn standard English first or learn to read from materials written in a form of English which comes closer to approximating their oral language. Other non-standard English speaking children are fortunate or perceptive enough to learn to read well enough to translate the standard English written text into non-standard oral reading. All evidence seems to indicate that the child who reads "He walked up the street" as "He walk up the street" has learned to read rather well, well enough, in fact, to do what a good reader ought to do -- to translate the printed page into his own language system.

If I were a reading teacher with a child who reads in this fashion I would be less concerned with his ability to read than with his ability to speak standard English. It is obvious that he can read. The fact that he seems to have ignored the letters -ed in walked is evidence only that he has made the written text real in his own linguistic system -- one which realizes past tense as zero. It is for this reason

that I suggest that teachers should not confuse learning standard English with learning to read.

3. SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

a. Researchers should address themselves to the different problems and rates of the acquisition of standard English by different sub-groups of society. Despite the recent research by linguists and psychologists concerning language acquisition of children, we still know practically nothing about contrastive rates of acquisition caused by dialect or language interference. What effect does a non-standard English home environment have on this acquisition? Can this effect be quantified? What effect does a bilingual home have on the acquisition of standard English? What effect does the sex of the child have on his rate of acquiring standard? These and many other such questions should be answered in the near future if we are serious about research in the relationship between the child's oral language and the classroom.

b. Researchers should study norm-adoption practices more thoroughly. Of crucial interest here are such problems as who are the language models of children of different ages, race, sex and socio-economic status? What is the role of the teacher as a language model? What is the role of non-standard English as a tool of instruction? At what age can adult norms of standard English be best learned? If a certain feature is more efficiently learned at one age than another can the school tolerate the non-standard form until the standard feature is more efficiently learned?

4. SUGGESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

a. <u>Administrators should carefully assess the classroom teaching situation in terms of institutional interference to utilizing oral language effectively</u>. By this I mean that the currently defined educational institution in many ways puts unnatural restrictions on the use of natural, oral language. We have long recognized, for example, that the schools place a high premium on quietness. This can be, of course, in direct opposition to the situation which encourages a child to be verbal. It is paradoxical that the institution which frequently labels certain children as non-verbal is the one which, by its administrative expectations, encourages children to be quiet. It is not yet clear how this paradox will be resolved but if we are serious about encouraging children to use the oral language that they bring with them to school, it is apparent that we are going to need to reexamine our traditional reverance for quietness in the classroom.

Another aspect of institutional interference to language development in the classroom stems from the femininity of the teaching mode. All the recent sociolinguistic research which compares male and female oral language practices at any age or socio-economic level indicates that females are more normative in their language behavior than males (Wolfram, 1969). It has long been recognized that girls use the language more naturally than boys throughout most of childhood and adolescence. It would be interesting to learn how much of this presumed female maturity stems from the feminine viewpoint of the teacher and how much of the presumed male immaturity stems from social pressures on boys to be thought of as masculine, athletic and

tough.

b. Administrators should give at least equal attention to matters of content in the curriculum, not just to administrative problems or teaching techniques. At a recent conference on the education of the disadvantaged child, virtually all of the attention of the participants focussed on methods of financing programs for the disadvantaged, techniques for evaluating such programs, administrative tactics (including community control), and on pedagogical techniques. If we had all the funding we needed, the most sophisticated evaluation instruments, good teachers and a well-oiled administrative machine, we would still lack the major ingredient -- the subject matter. Even if we had a large bank account, all the necessary cribs, diapers and saftey pins, the best Red-Cross course in baby care and all the weighing scales in the hospital, we will still need food if we are to operate effectively as parents to our children. This is not to say that matters of finance, administration, evaluation and pedagogy are unimportant. But it does appear that in the language arts at least, one ought to take a good hard look at the subject matter at least as often as these other matters. By this I mean that administrators should worry more about how the learning of reading, writing and speaking should be viewed in light of the specific linguistic, cultural and psychological situation of various sub groups. Even more specifically, do lower socio-economic black children have different decoding problems in reading than middle class children? What is normal oral reading performance for a specific age level? Exactly how different can we expect the

compositions of boys and girls to be? These and other questions noted in this paper may well serve to provide administrators with large/a number of important content considerations to accompany their more service oriented administrative issues.

TOWARD A NEW LANGUAGE ARTS

Somewhere, in the writing of textbooks, in the teaching of language arts, in the research setting and in the realm of administration, we find it easy to lose our focus on how kids really talk. It is much easier to believe that they talk the way we think they do. It is easier to write children's literature in our own adult language and from our own adult viewpoint. "Will it e're be dry again" is a sentence which is not likely to be said by children. In fact, it is a thought which is not likely to cross a child's mind -- at least not in this fashion. On the other hand, the idea that rain is the device whereby worms can take a bath is rather likely to occur to children for whom bath-taking is a ritual and who are considerably closer to the sidewalk where worms appear during rain storms. Such children are in much less of a hurry to get somewhere, making it possible for them to observe such a phenomenon of nature. When is the last time you adults can remember seeing a worm on the sidewalk? Can it be that worms don't do this as much as they did when we were children? Or has our power of observation merely grown adult?

A new language arts, if one is to be developed, will do well to consider the suggestions noted in this paper. But it would be unfortunate indeed if a new language arts were to be viewed in the way compensatory education has been considered in recent years. Just as compensatory education should have been viewed as the first step in a series of planned steps aimed at structural overhaul, so the suggestions

noted in this paper are symptomatic of a major overhaul required for the language arts in the near future. Educational change in the past has been characterized by the addition of layers to the foundations layed in the past century. Schools have tagged on programs in vocational education, special education and compensatory education. The situation in the language arts requires a great deal more than just another set of tag - ons.

Mario Fantini, in a recent address to a Seminar on educating the disadvantaged underscored the need for a new and more relevant educational institution but observed that such reform cannot take place until three major pillars of the present education system are changed: governance (politics), substance (objectives and content) and personnel. It is the substance to which we address ourselves most here. Fantini's observation is that at least four sets of educational objectives will emerge out of the overhaul of the substance of education:

(1) Subject matter mastery. The attainment of academic skills will be more individually tailored with emphasis on self-instructional techniques such as Individually Prescribed Instruction. Such programs will contain a strong tutorial component and computers will be used as diagnostic instruments.

(2) Individual Talents. The innate abilities of students will be sought out and utilized. At long last, perhaps, the long dormant educational ideal of starting where the child is will take on flesh and blood.

(3) Political Socialization. This exciting step would involve students in learning how to negotiate with adults, to identify the real power sources in their community, strategies for initiating change in the community, etc.

(4) Self-Identity. This objective will come to grips with the learner's concern for who he is and what his relationship is to others.

In terms of the overhaul of the language arts, these educational objectives are relevant to the suggestions noted earlier in this paper. If we are to take advantage of the child's innate abilities and individual talents with respect to language, we must think seriously about starting where the child is linguistically and we must accept his dialect for what it is, without condescension, recognize its strengths and beauties and let him use it even in the classroom. Exactly how this should be done is not totally clear at this time. The first step is for linguists to describe that dialect fully. It is easier, at the moment, to illustrate instances of where the school does not utilize the individual language talents of the students. Beginning reading materials, for example, frequently require the child to learn a kind of standard English before he can fully decode the written forms. Likewise, few secondary programs in oral language development provide transfer drills using the classroom production of nonstandard forms as a legitimate style of language production (see Feigenbaum, 1969) or as a device for learning by contrast. In a society which is, at long last, beginning to recognize pluralistic values, the focus on the differing innate abilities of children should probably begin with the language arts, where a child's language is his foremost differentiating tool at the primary level.

The development of oral language materials which are intended to teach standard English to non-standard English speakers brings with it a need for individually tailored techniques. It is, at present, inconceivable to make an oral production diagnostic test which can be taken in a group. Certain problems involving a standard stimulus for oral lan-

guage lessons has also led the Center for Applied Linguistics materials developers to use a tape recording as a stimulus with individual responses in a self-correcting workbook.* There is no reason to doubt that the language arts will utilize individually prescribed instruction with tutorial or peer-teaching components in the future.

The language arts can perhaps take advantage of political socialization most easily of all. Skills of negotiation, identifying power sources and initiating change in a community all grow out of communicative competence. If the language arts were to adopt a problem oriented format to be tackled in a realistic social setting, it would take giant strides toward relevance, and motivation would be considerably less of a problem than it now is.

The language arts student's concern for self identity can also be met through an honest assessment of language difference. As an example of this, the Center for Applied Linguistics currently in developing units in Black English which are intended to be a part of an English language curriculum. Students in such a course are to study the system and structure of Black English, noting its regularity and strengths in contrast with the regularity and strengths of Standard English. This is not a skills course but, rather, an analogy to the identity building courses in history, music and art. It is intended to provide a positive underpinning for the student's understanding of his own language, certainly an important part of his self identity.

What we are saying here is, essentially, that a new language arts will put considerable emphasis on self-instructional and tutorial ap-

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* These materials, developed by Irwin Feigenbaum in connection with the Washington D.C. public schools under funding by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, are currently being published by Appleton-Century-Crofts.

proaches to subject matter mastery. It will identify and make good use of the innate abilities of its students. It will be problem oriented, particularly with respect to current problems of communication. And, last, it will concern itself with the learner's need to know himself. We have outlined a few suggestions for textbook writers, teachers, researchers and administrators as they consider the task of the language arts today. Each has its own kind of hang-ups and each has its own particular contribution to make. But over-riding all of these suggestions is the power of the child's beginning point, the individual oral language which he brings with him to the classroom. We will come to a sorry end, indeed, if we must continue to ask ourselves the question in the title of this paper, "Whatever Happened to the Way Kids Talk?"